

# Contemporary Manifestations Of Aldersgate

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Aldersgate is both historical and contemporary. Its epoch reaches from Calvary to the present moment. It met the deep needs of the eighteenth-century Wesley and it reaches the needs of every man today who, by the help of God, breaks through to spiritual certainty.

In an effort to see more clearly the contemporary manifestations of Aldersgate we must look at modern human problems. Having identified those that are most characteristic we shall then observe how Aldersgate brings healing to modern man at the point of his deepest needs. In this paper, as in medicine, diagnosis must come before therapy.

Contemporary man's basic problem is seen in his separation from God. He is alienated from God, the source of true life. He is estranged from his essential Being. Human separation from God is not only an academic theological datum; neither is it a static fact of life. It is rather a deeply moving and dynamic condition that affects man in the most profound areas of his personality. Human estrangement from God has caused a deep cleavage in human nature. On the one hand, there is a restiveness arising out of divine-human alienation that motivates man to search for God. On the other hand, in this ambivalent situation, there is stubborn resistance to the Almighty.

## I

Divine-human alienation is manifested in contemporary life by a number of significant symptoms. We shall view three of these, namely, guilt, hostility, and anxiety, with attention devoted to the motivating power of each. Having done that, we shall then turn to observe that the Aldersgate experience manifests its power in these maladjustive areas of life when it reconciles sinful man to God.

A. Estrangement from God causes contemporary man to live under a massive sense of guilt. Man feels guilty because of his alienation from God. He intuitively feels that he belongs to his heavenly Father but in his unregenerate state man maintains his estrangement in unbelief. He feels condemned because he knows that he is a prodigal in a far country who will not go home. Secondly, man feels guilty because of his own personal sins. Recognizing responsibility for his deeds he lives under a sense of divine disapproval.

The sense of guilt expresses itself in debilitating effects all the way from "a halting in the onward march of life to complete mental breakdown." It produces attitudes of timidity toward life. It annuls many of the creative forces of human personality. It becomes a dynamic center of compulsive actions that waste energy in a "guilt-ridden piety." Guilt is basic to all kinds of personality maladjustments. William Stekel believed that every neurotic suffers from a guilty conscience.

B. Estrangement from God causes contemporary man to be hostile. Feeling rejected by God, man becomes hostile to Him. Human experience suggests that feelings of rejection usually breed attitudes of hostility.

Observation of life about us shows that there is a vast amount of overt and explicit hostility toward God. It is shown by man's arrogant and wilful independence from God with the insistence that he alone direct his life. It is seen in many religious people by a substitution of pious works while they persistently direct their inner lives as they wish. Hostility toward God is shown by erudite professors in colleges and universities who belittle the Almighty, substituting their tentative hypotheses for His infinite wisdom. The extensive practice of cursing and swearing reveals the large amount of hostility to God. Men blaspheme the name of their Benefactor because they are inwardly hostile to Him. They impiously use His name, casting their profanities toward heaven, as small boys throw stones at a stranger whom they consider to be unfriendly.

Having become hostile to God, man becomes hostile to his fellows. The measure of contemporary hostility is seen dramatically in today's world that is divided into two armed camps, each preparing lavishly for cosmic suicide.

Many people take a third step in their personal experiences of hostility. Their antagonism to God and to their fellowmen often leads to hostility toward self. Caught up in feelings of

malice, they develop a masochistic animosity toward themselves. Some of these persons become driven by compulsions and obsessional thoughts, and commit suicide. Many others have given serious thought to self destruction but have feared to follow that course.

C. Separation from God causes anxiety in modern man. Even Freud, in his later theories, came to believe that human anxiety was rooted in "the dread of becoming helpless and alone in a hostile, unfriendly universe." Man becomes fearful in psychological isolation. Alienation from God often leads to alienation from others and also from self. Many psychotherapists and certain theologians have recognized three basic kinds of anxiety.

First, there is an anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness. This arises out of the loss of an ultimate concern. A sense of emptiness follows a lack of relatedness to God, others, and self. The eternal spirit in man finds life basically without meaning when estranged from the Eternal. In the words of Frank Paul Morris, "man has been overbuilt for this world." He needs objectives that have an eternal dimension.

Secondly, anxiety arises from man's moral freedom. Kierkegaard called this the "dizziness of freedom." It is really an anxiety that arises out of moral responsibility. It comes as one looks down the "yawning abyss" of human possibility and recognizes that eternal consequences rest upon present choices. Psychotherapists usually refer to the anxiety of moral freedom as the anxiety of guilt.

Thirdly, there is the anxiety that arises out of death. This anxiety is basic and universal, and man in himself has no way to escape it. There is fear of death because of the eternal immensity that lies ahead. Separated from God, man is overwhelmed when he looks into the beyond.

Having surveyed deep and urgent human problems that rise out of man's separation from God, we shall turn now to see the relevance of Aldersgate to contemporary man's plight.

## II

Aldersgate has an answer to man's deepest needs. It exhibits a spiritual reality that effects a genuine reconciliation of man to God. In doing this, it provides healing power for human guilt, hostility, and anxiety. A part of the genius of the

Aldersgate experience is seen in its dimension of depth. It brought to a close John Wesley's weary search of peace that extended over thirteen frustrating years. It provides modern man with a certitude of his reconciliation with God after he has exhausted the resources of self-help in psychology and psychiatry and after he has sought salvation by relying on religious externals.

The central fact of Aldersgate is seen in a redemptive confrontation of man and God. In this confrontation divine-human separation gives way to reconciliation. Acceptance takes the place of estrangement. The distant God comes near at hand, indeed within the heart of the believer. The cold heart becomes warmed by the divine presence.

It is worth our time to note that Wesley's meeting of God on the evening of May 24, 1738, was rooted in the deepest spiritual reality. Explanations of it on any other basis are vapid. The redemptive meeting of God was so definite that Wesley could date it by the clock as "about a quarter before nine." The experience appealed to his mind. An assurance was given him that his sins were forgiven. The confrontation affected him emotionally. The unmystical heart of the rational Wesley was strangely warmed. Certitude displaced thirteen years of spiritual confusion. Wesley, with a troop of friends, went at about 10:00 p. m. on May 24 to the room of his brother, Charles, who had been converted three days before. As he entered his brother's room he cried out with certainty, "I believe."

Aldersgate met Wesley at the point of his guilt problem. The divine therapy for human guilt was central in his experience. He states in his brief account of the experience: "An assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine." God accomplished in a moment what Wesley had tried to accomplish in a long search for God. Certitude displaced doubt. Like Christian, in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Wesley was free from the heavy burden of his guilt.

The Aldersgate experience reaches modern man at a point of great need. It frees him from the burden of guilt that was accumulated in sinful acts. It delivers from a sense of psychological and spiritual isolation rooted in guilt feelings. It takes away his feelings of being a moral exile. It sets free creative forces that had long been inhibited by the tyranny of guilt. It gives a man a new perspective. He can look into the past without

a sense of disenabling condemnation. He can look into the future with confidence.

Spiritual reality as expressed at Aldersgate alone has the ability to resolve objective guilt. Psychiatry has no effective means of resolving the guilt feelings that are based in sinful acts.

The Aldersgate experience has an answer to the problem of human hostility. The first overt evidence of new life in Wesley was an overflowing benevolence for his enemies. In his short account of his experience in his *Journal*, he states how inner hostility had given way to spontaneous and kindly concern for those who had wronged him. "I began to pray," he says, "with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me." Wesley found no difficulty in thinking of specific persons for whom he might pray in this manner. Perhaps names of people in Georgia leaped to his attention immediately as qualifying for his intercession.

Aldersgate offers man his best therapy for hostility. It is best because it is spontaneous and interior. The therapy for hostility is an integral part of the new life that comes through reconciliation with God. When a man is related to his God, he is related to his fellowmen.

Aldersgate has the basic cure for human hostility. Sociology has had small success in the reduction of human hostility through its emphasis on the principles of effective human association. Psychology has had only moderate success in lessening hostility in its attention to interpersonal relationships. The ultimate answer is in human transformation.

Aldersgate has an answer to human problems rooted in anxiety. Moral and spiritual anxiety had driven Wesley in a long series of compulsive acts in search of release from inner dread. It was on Aldersgate Street that he was delivered from the irrational drive of anxious thoughts. Assurance of reconciliation with God set free the anxiety-ridden searcher for peace.

The evidence of deliverance from anxiety in Wesley is dramatic. It was in the sick room of Charles Wesley at 10:00 p.m., May 24, that the two newly converted brothers sang of their new-found freedom from anxiety. The hymn they sang had been written, it seems, by Charles Wesley the day before. It expresses a part of the genius of Aldersgate.

Where shall my wondering soul begin?

How shall I to heaven aspire?

A slave redeemed from death and sin,  
A brand plucked from eternal fire,  
How shall I equal triumphs raise?  
Or sing of my great Deliverer's praise?

They sang also of freedom from the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness. The Wesleys were evangelists immediately after their conversions.

Come, O my guilty brethren, come,  
Groaning beneath your load of sin!  
His bleeding heart shall make you room,  
His open side shall take you in;  
He calls you now, invites you home,  
Come, O my guilty brethren, come.

Aldersgate has the basic answers for persons who are filled with anxiety. Interior transformation delivers from the anxiety that arises from objective guilt through an assurance of the forgiveness of sins. It frees persons from the anxiety of meaninglessness by relating them to God and by setting them to work with Him in the accomplishment of His objective purposes. It emancipates men from an abnormal dread of death by the confidence that they belong to God who will receive them into eternal felicity.

The genius of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience is seen in his personal break-through into spiritual reality. Aldersgate lifted Wesley from a plateau of futile religious striving to a level of spiritual victory in which God's reconciling grace was the dominant factor. The newly converted Wesley had new attitudes, new sentiments, new aspirations, and a new spiritual confidence. The new life in Christ banished the psychologically destructive attitudes of guilt, hostility, and anxiety. Thus, Aldersgate is both good religion and good psychological therapy.